

Hide the Shiny Skeleton

The five-inch rod of metal—a magic wand of sorts—meets my fingertips with a cold salutation. In about a minute, the device screeches to life. Tiny lightning bolts arc from its tip, dissolving into thin air. I use my mirror to find the pressure points on my face. Then I prod each one with the wand. The skin of my face sags as if I were a wax sculpture in the process of melting.

Reaching into my mouth, I peel back the cowl of faux flesh to reveal my true face. A chrome skull with pinpoints of blue light for eyes stares back at me from the mirror. Tangles of multicolored wires flow down its shining vertebrae.

Sometimes I have nightmares about myself, but I'm never the monster in them. In one dream, a truly human version of me walks up to my bedside. He snatches my pillow from me, he lifts the pillow overhead, the pillow morphs into a black boulder, and he crushes my CPU. In the other dream, I am a specimen in a zoo. Sleek, beautiful automatons even more majestic than organic humans pity me from behind glass. Their polished armor, translucent skin, and glimmering eye-lenses stand in stark contrast to my naked frame of wires and metal bones. In every dream, my thoughts and movements are painfully sluggish.

Dad doesn't know that I know, and I plan to keep it that way. After all, he worked so hard to construct this façade. I'm a marvel of engineering, but the world will never know. Growing up, he was the epitome of a nerd. I know about his childhood through stories he has told. Also, my younger brother is exactly like him. No, really—he's ninety-nine percent identical to the way Dad was at his age. When I was a few years old, Dad's colleagues perfected human cloning. He used their findings to make a flesh-and-blood test tube baby. My brother's irises are milky white

and ringed with black, making his eyes look like targets (the telltale sign of a synthetic human). He wears special contact lenses that create the illusion of green eyes.

Needless to say, my father and brother share a special bond. . . because they are the same guy! The latter always knows the right words to say to the former. Sometimes, they don't need to say anything; they exchange meaning via knowing looks while my CPU scrambles to decode their nonverbal signals.

My brother never lorded anything over me, though. We did not share many opinions, but we shared almost everything else. When Dad would get mad at me, my brother was always quick to talk him down. With me, Dad would frequently appropriate an oldschool catchphrase:

“What’s your malfunction?” (The figure of speech made *much* more sense after I discovered my true nature.) Our arguments would always cause warm pulses to flood my spinal column, but neither my brother nor I could stay angry with Dad. He’s just the freakishly smart kid who grew into a brilliant wallflower, acquired scholarships, stacked his resume with S.T.E.M. degrees, became financially stable, made only a handful of friends, forgot how to pursue romance, and used technology to craft two sons and roleplay as a quirky single parent. It could happen to anyone, really.

We never left Votsboro, but most of our friends have. I don't mind the anonymity, though. In fact, I believe that our new neighbors are finally getting used to my stilted personality! If only I could—

“Five minutes!” Dad calls from downstairs. I re-apply my real boy costume quickly but thoroughly; I dare not face my world—or my family—without it.